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TOPOGRAPHICAL HISTORY OF SOUTH BOSTON

South Boston's topography has been changed radically since it was severed from Dorchester and annexed to Boston in 1804. Then South Boston was a peninsula of approximately 570 acres, dominated by two prominent hills and separated from the Boston peninsula by South Boston Bay and the marshy Dorchester Flats. (Figure I) Today filling operations have altered all of South Boston's original shoreline; Castle Island has become part of the peninsula; the Fort Point Channel is only a vestigal remnent of the South Boston Bay; and Nook, Leek and Birds Hills have been cut down.

During the 17th and 18th centuries South Boston served Dorchester as pasturage and remained wholly rural. It is believed that the first house was built on the peninsula in 1674 and that the land was fenced off into lots only in 1718. General Howes' map of South Boston (Figure II), drawn for the British Army in 1775, shows only 14 buildings scattered along two roads - one running east/west along the present route of Broadway or 4th Street and another branching north off Dorchester Street to Nooks Hill at about 7th Street. If one added half a dozen buildings, this map would depict the peninsula when it, with its population of 10 families, was annexed to Boston by an Act of the General Court.

The annexation of South Boston resulted from a real estate speculation on the part of Joseph Woodward, Harrison Gray Otis, and others. Having acquired land on the peninsula, then called the Dorchester Neck, these men applied to the General Court to annex the whole area to the Town of Boston. After strenuous opposition from Dorchester, the General Court acted favorably upon the speculators' request. It is significant in the topographical history of South Boston that on the same day, March 6, 1804, that Governor Strong signed the annexation bill into law, he also approved bills incorporating both the South Boston Bridge Proprietors and the Front Street Corporation. In 1805, the South Boston Bridge Proprietors opened the peninsula's first direct link with Boston, a 1,551 foot bridge located on the site of the Dover Street Bridge. In conjunction with the construction of this bridge, the Dorchester and Milton Turnpike (today's Dorchester Avenue) was built extending from the South Boston end of the new

bridge to Dorchester Lower Mills. The Turnpike, portions of which were built as a causeway over the Dorchester Flats, remained the western boundary of the South Boston peninsula for several decades. As the Turnpike encroached upon South Boston Bay from the east, the Front Street Corporation began filling the Bay's western boundary for residential development along the eastern, or waterside, of Washington Street between Beach and Berkeley Streets. Thus, within a decade of annexation, the forces were arrayed which were to create the pattern of South Boston's 19th century architectural and topographical development: real estate speculation, bridges to Boston proper, extension of the peninsulas' shorelines, and finally, the establishment of industry on newly made land, which began in 1809 when Cyrus Alger came to South Boston and opened its first major foundry.

South Boston's present grid street pattern was largely determined by a stipulation in the Act of Annexation which provided that land be set aside for streets, a school, a meeting house, and a burial ground. This requirement was executed through the acceptance of Mather Withington's survey and street plan of 1805. Withington's design established Broadway and L Streets as principal axes, provided for the rectilinear and regular blocks of A through Q and First through Eighth Streets, and promoted the later 19th century institutional use of the present Independence Square area.

Despite this laying out of streets and the completion of the Dover Street Bridge and the Turnpike, South Boston developed slowly in the first quarter of the 19th century. In 1825, with its population of 1,986, it was a disappointment to its developers. But South Boston developed rapidly between 1825 and the outbreak of the War Between the States; it is the nature of this period of growth which determined much of the present character of South Boston's urban fabric. During this period, the peninsula's industrial potential was recognized; consequently, land values in South Boston rose 450% between 1835 and 1845. The South Boston Iron Works were incorporated in 1827, the Fulton Iron Works in 1835, the City Point Iron Works were established in 1847, and, most significantly for the area north of First Street, the railroads entered the peninsula in 1845.

In 1845, the Old Colony Railroad tracks were laid along the present Old Colony Avenue, crossed Fort Point Channel near West Broadway and terminated at the Kneeland Street Station. A decade later the Boston and New York Central laid its tracks parallel to B Street and across the Fort Point Channel to South Station. The Boston Wharf Company, served by the Boston and New York Central on made land north of West First Street, built the Congress Street Bridge which the city acquired in 1855 for $60,000. The acquisition of this bridge and the opening of the northern portion of A Street which also occurred in 1855 provided the first major public way linking industrial South Boston to both Boston proper and to residential South Boston south of First Street.

This expenditure was fully justified in 1855 as South Boston, with a population of 17,931, had become the third largest ward in the city. The growth rate of its population during the decade of 1845-1855 was 65.78% (during the same period the population of the city as a whole grew 42.20%), and in this decade the number of registered voters in South Boston increased 41.16% (from 1,421 to 2,116) against an increase in the city as a whole of only 14.69% (with 23,342 registered voters out of a population of 162,748 in 1855).

With its population growing rapidly to service its expanding industrial complex, South Boston had more houses - 1,978 - in 1855 than any other ward in the city. Architectural forms are discussed in the following survey; however, it might be noted here that 90% of these houses were frame, that the majority of them were built as 2 and 1/2 story one-family dwellings, were rectilinear in plan and had a narrow gabled end facing the street. After 1860, the multiple family row-house, built as a rental property and usually 3 or 4 stories high, became an increasingly frequent building type.

During the last decades of the 19th century, the institutions required by South Boston's growing residential population caused two major alterations in the peninsula's architectural and topographical character. One of these institutional improvements, the construction of the South Boston High School (1898-1900), required the partial destruction of what had been since 1849 South Boston's most scenic park. The high school was built upon the half of Thomas Park which had included a reservoir, a hill-top pond surrounded by a promenade. The second, and perhaps

the most dramatic topographical alteration in residential South Boston during the latter half of the 19th century, was the completion of the Strandway and the resulting development of the southern and eastern shores of the peninsula with the mall, the beaches, and Marine Park. The Strandway (begun in 1889), Marine Park (begun in 1881) and the connection to Castle Island were all projected as part of Frederick Law Olmsted's Boston Park System (1875-1895). Columbia Road, then being developed as a parkway, linked Marine Park and the Strandway to Franklin Park and the Arnold Arboretum; these in turn were connected to Jamaica Pond by the Arborway; from Jamaica Pond the Jamaicaway led to the Fens, and the Fens connected this 18 mile loop to the Charles River the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, the Public Garden and the Boston Common.

In South Boston these improvements encouraged the development of a substantial residential area, between I Street and Farragut Road, overlooking Dorchester Bay. These homes, built largely between 1900 and 1920 and still excellently maintained in their complimentary setting, constitute the most distinguished of South Boston's 20th century developments.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The material consulted in the South Boston survey is included in Appendix IV , "Topographical and Architectural History of Boston: A Selected Bibliography". Two useful local histories which have not been included in that listing are: C. Bancroft Gillespie, History of South Boston (Boston: Inquirer, 1900), and Thomas C. Simonds, History of South Boston (Boston: David Clapp, 1857).

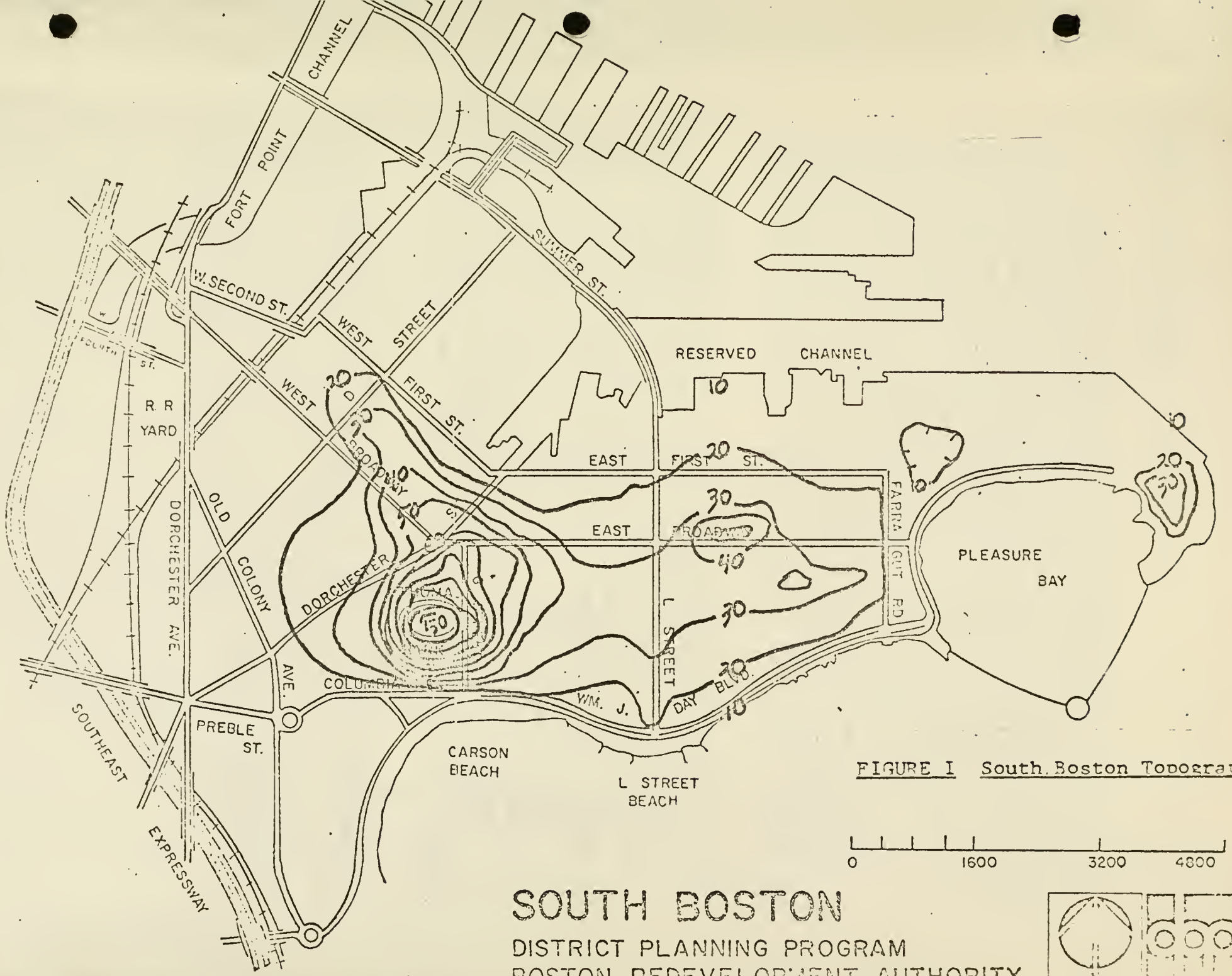

FIGURE I South Boston Topograph

SOUTH BOSTON

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South Boston Survey

Figure 1 is a rendering of the South Boston portion of the United States Geodetic Survey map of Boston and Vicinity. It demonstrates the prominence of Dorchester Heights, notes the extensive shoreline, points out the gently sloping ridge which runs east-west south of East Broadway and emphasizes the anchor-like effect of Castle Island rising out of the flat, filled land surrounding Pleasure Bay. The map also notes the arc of relatively level land, land rising less than ten feet, which wraps around the western and northern sides of Dorchester Heights, extending from Carson Beach west to the Southeast Expressway and northward to Summer Street. This topography and its relationships to land-use, building type and traffic patterns divides residential South Boston into six areas, each having a distinct visual character. (Figure II)

Area 1, bounded on the west by Old Colony Avenue, Columbia Road, and the Old Colony Housing Project, on the north by Columbia Road and the Old Harbor Housing Project, looks out on Dorchester Bay across the expanse of Columbus Park. The continuity of the boulevard binds this larger area into the southern boundary of residential South Boston. The Boulevard, begun in 1889, is lined on its north side from I Street to Farragut Road with a row of compatible houses built largely between 1900 and 1925. These houses, like the boulevard's median and the shoreline, encourage a sense of unity, a continuous flow, which is punctuated by the L Street Bath House (1901) and the boat clubs (1890's).

Area 2, Marine Park, Pleasure Bay, and Castle Island derive their visual character from their openness and their harbor frontage. This quality is emphasized by its opposition to the industrial barrier in the north and the wall of houses to the west. This area offers the most notable recreational usage of the city's harbor shoreline and serves both visually and psychologically as a coherent seaward terminus of the South Boston peninsula.

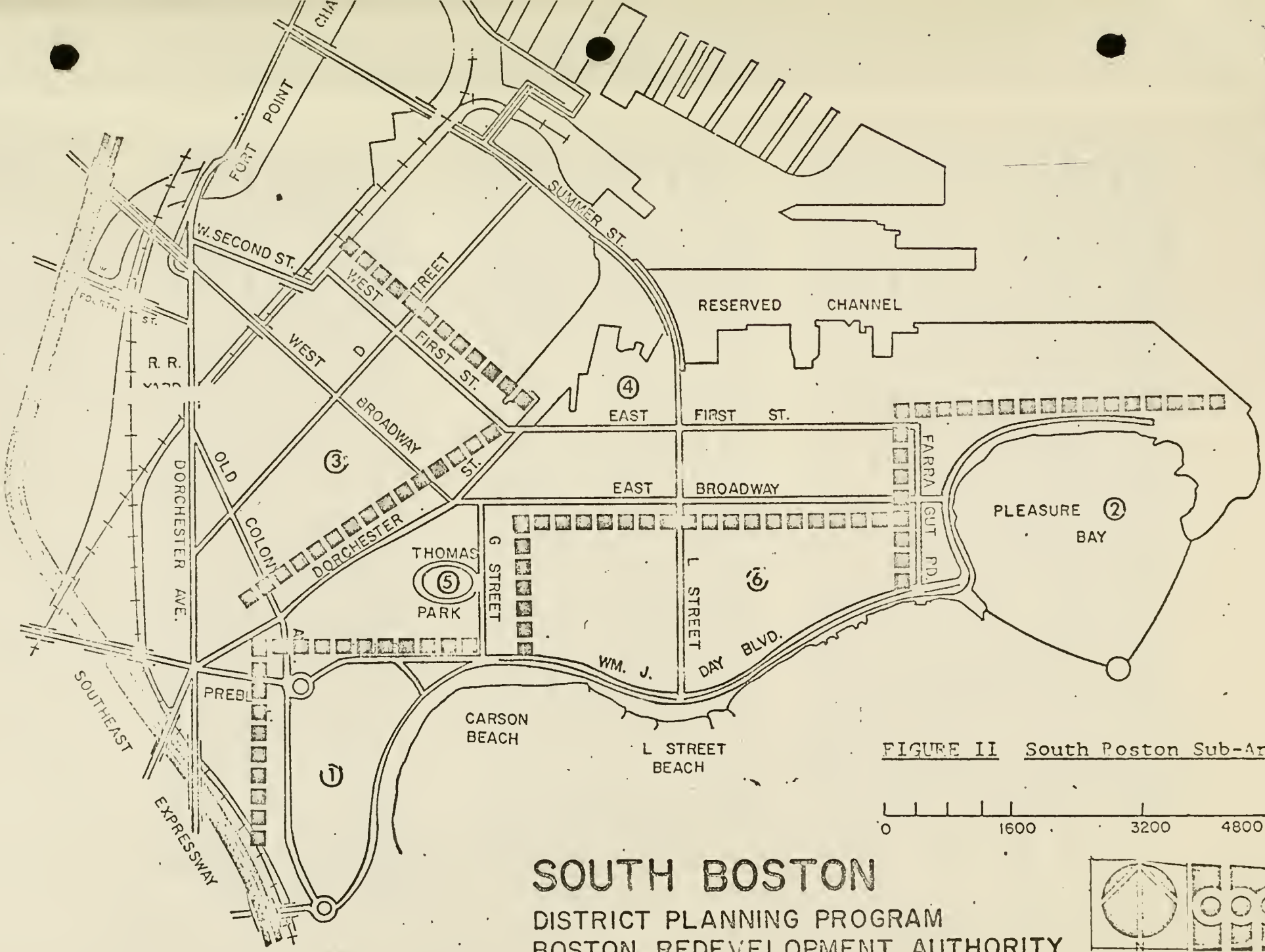

FIGURE II South Boston Sub-Areas

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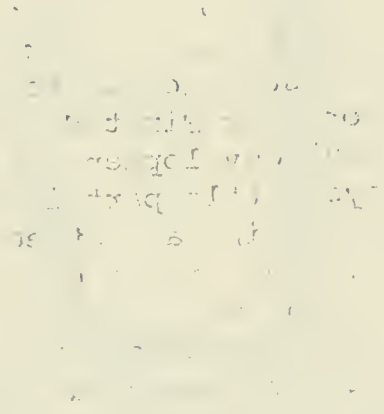

Area 3, the flat land to the west of Dorchester Heights, is bounded by industrial, manufacturing and commercial land-use (see Figure II) and heavy traffic along Dorchester Avenue and West First and Second Streets and by the older and more substantial commercial and residential development along Dorchester Street at the foot of Dorchester Heights. Excepting the housing projects and the commercial spine along West Broadway, Area 3 is composed largely of two and three family frame houses which were speculatively built in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The blandness of these houses is reinforced by the monotonous street pattern; these two factors combine to deny internal visual cohesion to the area. The area's salient visual characteristic is a centrifugal sense of boundary.

Area 4, is bounded on the south by Broadway and slopes downhill to First Street in the north. This incline makes its natural visual focus the industrial area on the filled land north of First Street. Due to the scale of this industrial development, the waterview, the Reserved Channel, plays little part in the visual character of area 4. Its housing and street patterns are much like area 3's. The incongruities of mixed residential, commercial and industrial land-use, the heavy traffic along First, Dorchester, and Summer Streets, vacant land and poor housing conditions dictate the visual character of area 4.

Area 5, generates the most intense sense of locality in residential South Boston. The High School, Thomas Park and its monument serve as a common foreground for the houses that ring the summit of Dorchester Heights. The vistas from the hill are a shared background, and the hill itself dominates the streets that approach the park. These streets, particularly portions of G, Linden, Pacific, and Atlantic Streets, have their historic character intact. For example, the five blocks of G Street between Broadway and East 7th Street are flanked by an unbroken skein of

Italianate row houses, all contiguous to one another and abutting the sidewalk, having a uniform 3 story cornice height, similar porches, stoops, and exterior moulding. Streetscapes of this type and a number of individually notable houses fronting on Thomas Park make this one of South Boston's most distinguished architectural areas.

Area 6, bounded by G Street, East Broadway, Farragut Road, and the boulevard, has no central visual focus. It derives its identity as a neighborhood from homogenious street-scapes enclosed by clearly defined topographical boundaries. The street axes focus attention upon Dorchester Heights, Pleasure Bay and Dorchester Bay while the ridge which crests at the head of Independence Square serves as a northern boundary and offers views west along Broadway and north toward the Reserved Channel. The area's harmonious building scale of 2 and 1/2 to 3 story multiple family housing is the major element in its architectural identity. This identity rarely includes significant design qualities.

Industrial South Boston (Figure III): the Boston Wharf Company complex, from Melcher Street in the south to Sleeper, Farnsworth, Pittsburg and Stillings Streets in the north, is one of the most dense concentration of distinguished buildings in South Boston. These buildings, which are both individually notable and collectively impressive, were built over a 30 year span and demonstrate an evolution of style. (On Congress Street for example, the westermost brick buildings (number 343 et. al.) were built before 1891, number 332 in 1891, 348 in 1894, 358 in 1900, 381 and 374 in 1907, 369 in 1918.) The uniform lack of set-back, common cornice height, and the vista northwest along Summer and Congress Streets enhance the area's visual unity.

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The block between Wormwood and Binford Streets on A Street, built by the Factory Buildings Trust in the 1890's, is a less interesting, though intact, example of nineteenth century warehousing and manufacturing facilities.

As indicated by Figure IV, residential South Boston possesses a large number of historically and architecturally distinguished sites and buildings. Dorchester Heights is not only the site of Boston's greatest Revolutionary victory but is also the center of an architecturally significant area. Columbia Road and the William J. Day Boulevard, particularly between I and P Streets, represent the city's most successful residential use of its harbor frontage. In these ten blocks the demands of architecture and topography, of public and private use, and of pedestrian and vehicular traffic achieve an harmonious resolution. Marine Park and Castle Island are both notable as historic sites and as public recreation areas. And East Broadway presents a broad spectrum of later 19th century architectural styles (particularly in numbers 509 through 520, 787 through 827, and 932 through 942) and demonstrates the continuing social vitality of the area's older architectural fabric.

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